Civilization is spread more by singing than anything else, because whole big bunches can sing a particular song where not every man can join in on the conversation. A song ain’t nothing but a conversation fixed up to where you can talk it over and over without getting tired of it. And it’s this repeating the idea over and over that makes it take a hold. If the conversation is about good crops, or bad, good politics or bad, good news or bad, good anything else or bad, the best way to circulate it amongst the people is by singing it.

* * *

Our job ain’t so much to go way back into history, that already been done, and we can’t spare the time to do it all over again. Our job is the Here & Now. Today. This week. This month. This year. But we’ve got to try and include a Timeless Element in our songs. Something that will not tomorrow be gone with the wind. But something that tomorrow will be as true as it is today. The secret of a lasting song is not the record current event, but this timeless element which may be contained in their chorus or last line or elsewhere.

— Woody Guthrie

This course will be an exploration of leadership in the arts and will examine that subject from three different perspectives. First, we will be considering figures in traditional, old-time, and folk music whose contributions were, in many ways — sometimes great, sometimes small — transformative; that is to say, we will be looking at those without whom American music arguably would not be what it is today. Second, we will be considering their songs as a variety of American political thought, as expressions of their ideas about human nature and the politics of their day. Finally, we will be evaluating the power of song as a rhetorical means of spreading, and perhaps inculcating those ideas in the minds of the people, taking seriously Woody Guthrie’s claim that folk music “ain’t nothing but a conversation fixed up to where you can talk it over and over without getting tired of it” with the result that it is “this repeating the idea over and over that makes it take a hold.”

Since many of the figures we will be studying may be unknown to you, or only slightly known, we will be reading the major studies of their lives and contributions. But this will not just be a
reading course; it will be — especially — a listening course. Each session will be a combination of discussing the readings, listening to the original recordings of these artists, and not infrequently viewing documentaries that will help to put their music and their contributions into context.

Assessment for the seminar will consist of class participation (20%); a research paper on a topic to be agreed (40%); and a final take-home examination (40%). The possible range of topics for your papers will be broad and could include the study of a particular artist that we have not covered in depth or the history of a particular song that captures your attention. The paper will develop over the course of the semester according to the schedule included as the addendum to this syllabus.

Required Texts

Ed Cray, *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie*

Hazel Dickens and Bill C. Malone, *Working Girl Blues: The Life and Music of Hazel Dickens*

Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One*

Bill C. Malone, *Music from the True Vine*

Alec Wilkinson, *The Protest Singer*

Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*

Mark Zwonitzer (with Charles Hirshberg), *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?: The Carter Family and their Legacy in American Music.*

Class Assignments

I. January 12: By Way of Introduction — The Great Themes

A. Despair and Hope

Stephen Foster, “Hard Times Come Again No More”

Blind Alfred Reed, “How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live?”

Bradley Kincaid, “Two Little Orphans”

Woody Guthrie, “I Ain’t Got No Home”

James King, “Thirty Years of Farming”
Ginny Hawker, “Sunshine in the Shadows”

The Carter Family, “Keep on the Sunny Side”

Bob Dylan, “When the Ship Comes In”

John Hartford, “Big Rock Candy Mountain”

Hobart Smith, “Uncloody Day”

**B. Home, Hearth, and Heaven**

The Carter Family, “Homestead on the Farm”

Connie and Babe and the Backwoods Boys, “Dreamin’ of a Little Cabin”

Doc Watson, “The Old Wooden Rocker”

The Blue Sky Boys, “If I Could Hear my Mother Pray Again”

The Whites, “Will My Mother know Me There?”

Whitstein Brothers, “Shake my Mother’s Hand for Me”

June Carter Cash, “Hold Fast to the Right”

Gillian Welch and Alison Krauss, “I’ll fly Away”

**C. Notes on Influence and Adaptability**

1. “No Depression in Heaven” — Three Versions
   a. Sheryl Crow
   b. The New Lost City Ramblers
   c. The Carter Family

2. From A. P. Carter to Woody Guthrie
   a. Woody Guthrie, “This Land is Your Land”
   b. The Carter Family, “Little Darlin’ Pal of Mine”
   c. The Carter Family, “When the World’s on Fire”
II. January 19: The Appalachians and their Music

A. *The Appalachians* (viewing of episode three of the documentary)

B. Hills, Hollers, and Industrialization: Trains, Mines, and Disasters

Doc Watson, “Dream of the Miner’s Child

Bill Clifton, “Springhill Disaster”

John Prine, “Paradise”

Elizabeth Cotten, “Freight Train”

Vernon Dalhart, “Wreck of the Old ‘97”

Johnny Cash, “Engine 143”

III. January 26 and February 2: The Carter Family

A. Reading:


B. *The Carter Family: Will the Circle be Unbroken* (viewing of the documentary)

C. Bristol and Ralph Peer: The First Recordings

“Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow”

“Little Log Cabin by the Sea”

“Poor Orphan Child”

“The Storms are on the Ocean”

“Wandering Boy”

“Single Girl, Married Girl”
D. The Carter Family Canon: Four Great Themes

1. Faith
   “Anchored in Love”
   “Church in the Wildwood”
   “Where We’ll Never Grow Old”

2. Home
   “My Clinch Mountain Home”
   “Longing for Old Virginia”
   “A Distant Land to Roam”

3. Love and Loss
   “I Loved You Better than You Knew”
   “Wildwood Flower”
   “I’ll Be All Smiles Tonight”
   “Gold Watch and Chain”

4. Death
   “Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow”
   “Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?”
   “Can the Circle be Unbroken?”

IV. February 9 and 16: Woody Guthrie and the Urban Folk

A. Reading:
   Cray, Ramblin’ Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie: pp. 3-77; 103-184; 228-392.

B. Woody Guthrie: Ain’t Got No Home (viewing of the documentary)
C. A Musical Sampling

1. Tough Times

“I Ain’t Got No Home”

“Goin’ Down the Road Feelin’ Bad”

“Hard Travelin’”

2. Hollow Dreams

“Ramblin’ Round”

“Pastures of Plenty”

“Do-Re-Mi”

“Deportees”

3. Search for True Values

“Jesus Christ”

“Pretty Boy Floyd”

“This Land is Your Land”

V. February 23 and March 1: Pete Seeger and the Music of Politics

A. Reading:

Wilkinson, *The Protest Singer* (entire)

B. *Pete Seeger and the Power of Song* (viewing of the documentary)

C. A Musical Sampling

1. Society and its Ills

“Little Boxes”

“What did You Learn in School Today?”

“The Clearwater”

“If I had a Hammer”
2. Unions and Labor

“Joe Hill”

“Which Side are You On?”

“Union Maid”

3. Peace

“Where have all the Flowers Gone?”

“Study War No More”

“Last Night I had the Strangest Dream”

4. Civil Rights

“If You Miss Me at the Back of the Bus”

“Oh, Freedom”

“I Ain’t Scared of your Jail”

“We Shall Overcome”

VI. March 15: Huddie William Ledbetter — Leadbelly

A. Reading:

Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*: 1-87; 178-256

B. *A Vision Shared: A Tribute to Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly* (viewing of the documentary)

C. A Musical Sampling

1. Tough Times

“We’re in the Same Boat, Brother”

“Pick a Bale of Cotton”

“TB Blues”

“Bourgeois Blues”

“New York City”

“Mr. Hitler”
2. A Little Bit of Hope

“Cotton Fields”

“In New Orleans”

“Blood Done Sign My Name”

“Rock Island Line”

“The Midnight Special”

“Goodnight, Irene”

VII. March 22: Mike Seeger, the New Lost City Ramblers, and Music from the True Vine

A. Reading:

Malone, Music from the True Vine: 1-52; 66-146; 169-174

B. New Lost City Ramblers: Always been a Rambler (viewing of the documentary)

C. A Musical Sampling

1. A Nearly Forgotten Tradition

“Sales Tax on the Women”

“How can a Poor Man Stand such Times and Live?”

“Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Back Again”

“No Depression in Heaven”

“On Some Foggy Mountain Top”

2. Recovering the Carters (with Mother Maybelle Carter at Newport Folk Festival)

“Gold Watch and Chain”

“Worried Man Blues”

“Little Darlin’ Pal of Mine”

“Wildwood Flower”
VIII. March 29; April 5: Bob Dylan and Joan Baez

A. Reading:

Dylan, *Chronicles* (entire)

B. *Bob Dylan: No Direction Home* (viewing of the documentary)

C. *Joan Baez: How Sweet the Sound* ((viewing of the documentary)

D. A Musical Sampling

1. Dylan

   “Song to Woody”

   “Blowin’ in the Wind”

   “Don’t Think Twice”

   “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall”

   “Masters of War”

   “With God on Our Side”

   “The Times They are A-Changin’”

   “Only a Pawn in Their Game”

   “When the Ship Comes In”

2. Baez

   “Joe Hill”

   “Last Night I had the Strangest Dream”

   “With God on Our Side”

   “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down”

   “Forever Young”

   “Farewell Angelina”
IX. April 12: Hazel Dickens

A. Reading:


B. *Hazel Dickens: It's Hard to tell the Singer from the Song* (viewing of the documentary)

C. A Musical Sampling

1. Remembering Home

“A Few Old Memories”

“Beyond the River Bend”

“Hills of Home”

“Mama’s Hand”

“West Virginia, My Home”

2. An Old Slant on New Themes

“Busted”

“It’s Hard to tell the Singer from the Song”

“Coal Tattoo”

“Working Girl Blues”

“TB Blues (with Alice Gerrard)”

“Let that Liar Alone” (with Alice Gerrard)

X. April 19: Bringing the Music to Life